House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Inquiry Into Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities

Submission by

Wollotuka School of Aboriginal Studies

University of Newcastle

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The UNIVERSITY
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AUSTRALIA

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House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Inquiry Into Capacity Building in Indigenous Communities

Terms of Reference

The Committee will inquire into and report on strategies to assist Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders better manage the delivery of services within their communities. In particular, the Committee will consider building the capacities of:

(a) community members to better support families, community organizations and representative councils so as to deliver the best outcomes for individuals, families and communities;

(b) Indigenous organizations to better deliver and influence the delivery of services in the most effective, efficient and accountable way; and

(c) Government agencies so that policy direction and management structures will improve individual and community outcomes for Indigenous people.

Recommendations

Recommendation: 1
That strategic responses designed to build capacity in Indigenous communities must take into consideration the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their communities.

Recommendation 2:
That consideration be given to exploring the implications of the ECEF modeling as principles to guide community capacity building strategies.

Recommendation 3:
An increased effort be undertaken by State and Commonwealth Governments to increase Indigenous school aged students' outcomes from education in a culturally approved pedagogy directed by Indigenous community peoples.

Recommendation: 4
That Action Research processes underpin strategic planning for community capacity building strategies.

Recommendation 5:
That government recognizes in funding allocations for community capacity building strategies, due regard must be taken with the view of longitudinal reform and development.

Recommendation 6:
Strategic responses to community capacity building must involve the direct co-ordination of government and non-government agencies and such responses must consider the importance of program flexibility at an Indigenous community level.

About Wollotuka School of Aboriginal Studies – University of Newcastle

Wollotuka was established as an Aboriginal enclave in the mid 1980s to increase access and support for Aboriginal students. Its function progressed from offering preliminary access programs, to diploma level offerings then to the Bachelor of Aboriginal Studies and Honours, in the undergraduate program.

In 1997 the Umulliko Indigenous Higher Education Research Centre was established as a Centre of Excellence with the then Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs' grant and subsequently pioneered programs in the areas of research Masters and Doctoral programs. Wollotuka is now a School in the Faculty of Education and Arts, and provides in addition to both undergraduate and post-graduate programs, policy, advice and support to the University on Indigenous issues.

The University of Newcastle currently services close to 300 Indigenous students across all Faculties. All of Wollotuka's academic and administrative staff is Indigenous Australians.

Introductory Comment
Diversity of Indigenous Australia

Indigenous Australia and its peoples are an extremely complex and diverse collection of communities and individuals. To seek a magic panacea, which will resolve all the issues in the compounded intricacies of community capacity building is a nonsense. To attempt to meet the needs of the diverse demographic, geographic, cultural, language and social circumstances of Indigenous peoples requires considerable flexibility, innovation and community tailored and owned strategic approaches. 'One size fits all' is a proven failure across any service provision to Indigenous communities. True answers and resolutions are only available if individual communities develop their own resources (both human and physical) and strategic planning. Outcomes from this inquiry and report must be based on individual community management of the processes to Indigenous capacity building. The true foundation of this approach must be through empowerment through community defined and developed education and training.

Population Trend

The profile of the Indigenous population contrasts markedly with that of the Non-Indigenous population by age. "70% of the Indigenous population is under 25 years of age, compared to about 45% of all Australians" (IESIP SRP, 2000:385).

Successive government policies over the past 200 odd years have not substantially provided equitable outcomes for Indigenous Australians. Given the current growing bulge in Indigenous youth population, if urgent attention, action and resolution of the current socio-economic disadvantages faced by Indigenous peoples is not adequately addressed the situation will explode to never before experienced levels. We are at perhaps the worst crisis point in this nation's history since wanton genocide of Indigenous peoples was practiced during the invasion of Indigenous Australia.

Resolutions and answers must be found immediately if we are to arrest this socio-economic time bomb. Effective resources and energies expended over the next decade in genuine empowerment through community capacity building, will be quality investment that will offset the likely long term consequences of endless decades forecasted to follow, should we not succeed in raising the socio-economic standards of Indigenous peoples.

Recommendation: 1
That strategic responses designed to build capacity in Indigenous communities must take into consideration the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their communities.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

Reference (a) Indigenous Community
(a) community members to better support families, community organizations and representative councils so as to deliver the best outcomes for individuals, families and communities;

The foundation of a community is its culture. Government policy and practice has systematically attempted to erode the fabric of Indigenous culture through assimilation. While assimilation is no longer formal government policy, its seductive agents now reside in institutions like education, law and employment agencies through their policies. The very successful assimilation practices have worn away the cultural identity of community and that which remains is ever threatened even more speedily, by media globalisation and the perpetuation of Black American cultures.

Effective and productive families and community organizations in Indigenous Australia can only succeed if founded on the fundamental principles of Indigenous cultures. Communities need to be resourced sufficiently to celebrate and participate in contemporary Australia based on a proud, enriched and enhanced Indigenous cultures and languages. In recent research conducted for the Enterprise Career Education Foundation (ECEF) (Lester et al, 2001) on transition programs for Indigenous youth, a critically important outcome indicated that successful transition from school to work for the majority of Indigenous students could not be achieved without first consolidating their own sense of identity through culture. This need became one of the six critical principles for capacity building in the area of transition. The following six principles as outcomes of the research are provided including the cultural, which is referred here under Holistic Development on the final dot point:

Primary Parameters for Modeling
- Indigenous community control and involvement in all aspects of the project was identified as the most important consideration.
- Establishment of genuine partnerships between the education and training institution, employers/business/enterprises and Indigenous community was essential for productive transition.

- Successful programs demonstrated high levels of energy, commitment and innovation of key personnel involved in the project. It was evident that this involvement ranged from individuals through to the more successful models of groups sharing similar strong vision and commitments.
- Incorporation of integrated work-place literacy and numeracy within projects.
- Flexibility – the capacity to respond quickly and appropriately to local environmental factors surrounding the project without major time wasted on bureaucratic re-processing of projects.
- Holistic development of the student – from personal (including parents/carers as partners) to professional e.g. self-esteem, cultural awareness, core skills (work-place literacy), business/work accruement and work survival skills (contending and coping with racism in workforce).

Overall, the above modeling which was conducted for ECEF on transition programs provides worthy consideration of the six parameters established i.e. Indigenous ownership, genuine partnership, depth of enthusiasm for the project, specific skill development (in this instance workplace literacy) flexibility of program and previously mentioned cultural base as its foundation. These parameters perhaps hold the key to 'how to do business in community capacity building'.

> *Recommendation 2:*
> *That consideration be given to exploring the implications of the ECEF modeling as principles to guide community capacity building strategies.*

Reference (b) Indigenous Organisations
(b) Indigenous organizations to better deliver and influence the delivery of services in the most effective, efficient and accountable way;

Improve Educational Outcomes for Indigenous Peoples

Development of Indigenous organizations is not possible without extensive improvements in educational outcomes for Indigenous peoples at all levels of education and training, a fact well supported in many reports and publications (Collins, 2000:2-4; Long et al, 1999:32-60). Unlike most Australians, Indigenous Australians are grossly disadvantaged when it comes to functioning at even basic levels as a community member, due to poor literacy levels. In the current computer literate expectations, lack of basic skills like literacy and numeracy (that are consistently being kept out of the reach of community members) the obstacles to effective community participation are numerous. (Nelson, 2002:ix) Capacity building must start with a foundation of literacy and numeracy for all Indigenous peoples.

> *Recommendation 3:*
> *An increased effort be undertaken by State and Commonwealth Governments to increase Indigenous school aged students' outcomes from education in a culturally approved pedagogy directed by Indigenous community peoples.*

Indigenous Middle Management Void

The problem is that we do not have significant numbers of middle management operatives on the ground in Indigenous communities (and those few that we do have we burn out). While still far from exhausted, there is a significant and growing number of Indigenous senior management and policy resources available to provide sufficient advice to governments. The real need exists for Indigenous entrepreneurial managers who can see opportunities and turn them into worthy community supported outcomes. These rare people cannot afford to leave their community to get additional training or education; they must be provided and developed on the ground. The challenge is to provide appropriate development of individuals whom community support and provide them with the skills to manage and instigate Indigenous enterprise.

We must however; take care that we do not only invest in the anointed few managers but also ensure capacity exists for a range of skilled middle management in each community. This is particularly important for succession planning, ensuring the community is provided with choice and to share the workload amongst a range of potential managers (in an attempt to prevent 'burn out').

Access to Tailored Community Based Education and Training

Sending students away to the best business and management training in the most progressive institution, will not alleviate the lack of on the ground management, it will only create employment for such Indigenous graduates from these institutions in government offices in cities remote from community need.

Community management programs need to be developed on a community-by-community needs basis. It is Umulliko's research experience to date, which clearly points to the most effective process for community development is generated through Action Research (Stringer, 1996). The Action Research Model provides the empowerment potential directly to the community:

> **Community-based action research is a collaborative approach to *inquiry* or *investigation* that provides people with the means to take systematic *action* to resolve specific problems. This approach to research favours consensual and participatory procedures that enable people (a) to investigate systematically their problems and issues, (b) to formulate powerful and sophisticated accounts of their situations, and (c) to devise plans to deal with the problems at hand.**
> **(Ernest Stringer, 1996:15)**

To further enhance and consolidate this empowerment it is vital that Indigenous peoples are skilled in the effective use of Action Research. Through networks and programs designed to train and support Indigenous Action Researchers, valuable Indigenous resource persons can be developed to work directly with and in communities, towards increased capacity building.

> *Recommendation: 4*
> *That Action Research processes underpin strategic planning for community capacity building strategies.*

Effective Community Capacity Comes At An Initial Investment Price

Given the enormity of the Indigenous disadvantage in all areas by any standard comparison you wish to make to mainstream society, effective community capacity building will not happen overnight and definitely cannot be fixed by investing further into white researchers and bureaucracies. Quick fixes or flying visits into communities do not work. The approach recommended here, utilising the proven values of Action Research, requires considerable investment in long-term processes. Processes that will provide the human infrastructure to meet the current and future challenges of the communities involved. Action Research is primarily reliant on developing the skills to tackle complex problems and to systemically work to their resolution in a process that develops and expands the individual and community resources. This will require a commitment of successive governments to a longitudinal approach to resolution of issues that have manifested themselves over 200 years.

> *Recommendation 5:*
> *That government recognizes in funding allocations for community capacity building strategies, due regard must be taken with the view of longitudinal reform and development.*

Reference (c) Government Agencies

(c) Government agencies so that policy direction and management structures will improve individual and community outcomes for Indigenous people.

Genuine Partnerships

As per research undertaken and noted previously in this submission for ECEF (Lester et al, 2001) one of the key principles for success with transition programs for Indigenous students was:

> **Establishment of genuine partnerships between the education and training institution, employers/business/enterprises and Indigenous community was essential for productive transition.**

The essence of this research finding is believed to be most commensurate with the need for government agencies involved in the policy direction and resourcing of Indigenous peoples and communities.

Capacity to Respond in a Co-ordinated and Flexible Manner

One of the principle frustrations and perhaps most damaging of community initiatives are government's agencies duplication and lack of co-ordination between each of its various service providers. Often sound community initiatives

are doomed to failure because agencies cannot work constructively together. A single government entity/agency should be empowered to co-ordinate service delivery in a one-stop shop approach.

Indigenous communities due to their diversity, respond differently to various stimuli and challenges they confront. Programs, policies and services must be responsive to this diversity. They should incorporate a level of flexibility in funding and delivery, which can only evolve as communities respond to their differing circumstances.

Recommendation 6:
Strategic responses to community capacity building must involve the direct co-ordination of government and non-government agencies and such responses must consider the importance of program flexibility at an Indigenous community level.

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